

Jesus, the Ladder to Heaven

by Major Ian Thomas

The sermon emphasizes the need for a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, and how this encounter is possible through faith in Jesus and his cross.

Duration: 40:36

Scripture: Genesis 12:3, Genesis 28:10, Genesis 28:15, Genesis 28:17, John 1:46-47, John 1:49

Topics: "Heaven"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of Jacob's encounter with God at a seemingly desolate place. Jacob, feeling homesick and lonely, finds himself in a situation where he believes he is in a god-forsaken spot. However, it is in this very place that he has a personal meeting with God. The preacher emphasizes that God often reveals Himself in unlikely situations and that even when we feel abandoned, God is present. The sermon also highlights the promise made to Jacob that from his seed, the Messiah would come and bless all the families of the earth. The preacher encourages listeners to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and recognize that even in the most unlikely places, God is present.

Transcript

The need for us to have a personal, and to use his phrase, a head-on encounter with Jesus Christ, and that nothing less is going to be the answer for our need. I want to read you the story of a man who had a head-on encounter with Jehovah, the God of his fathers. I'm reading of that encounter which Jacob had with the Lord at the place which came to be called Bethel.

It was the beginning of his relationship with God. He didn't have one of a personal nature until he met the Lord on this occasion. I'm reading from Genesis chapter 28, verse 10.

And Jacob, Genesis 28, verse 10. And Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. He was fleeing from his home.

He'd never left home before, but he was having to do that on this occasion, because he'd wronged his brother, and his brother Esau had vowed to kill him. And so with his mother's connivance, he fled home, from his home, and went back to her people, a long distance away, to spend time there till Esau's temper had cooled. And this was his first night out from home.

And he had to spend the night in the open air. He had to sleep in the open air. And for a pillow, he took the stones of the place.

And I think the fact that he had stones for a pillow was symbolic of the fact that life was hard to him at that moment. He was homesick. He was sad.

He was lonely. And what made it all worse was he knew it was his own fault. And I'm quite sure he never thought that that was the situation in which he would have a personal meeting with the God of his fathers.

I think as he looked round that desolate place as the sun was setting, he said, if ever there was a God-forsaken place, it's this one. And yet that was the place where he had his great encounter with Jehovah, with God. There's a hymn which says, It is thy boast to come into unlikeliest hearts.

And he does it in the most unlikely situations. And you may be in one such situation. You say, I'm really in a God-forsaken spot.

Don't you believe it? Maybe you will end up saying what Jacob said. Surely the Lord is in this place. And I knew it not.

This is none other. This place, this apparently God-forsaken place, I found to be none other but the house of God and the gate of heaven. And he lighted upon a certain place and tarried there all night because the sun was set.

And he took of the stones of that place and put them for his pillows and laid down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed. And behold, a ladder.

I think the Hebrew word can be translated a staircase. A ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

And behold, the Lord, Jehovah, stood above it and said, I am Jehovah, the God of Abraham thy father and the God of Isaac, the land whereon thou liest. To thee will I give it unto thy seed. And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth.

And thou shalt spread abroad to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south, and in thee and in thy seed. And you know who that was? It was Messiah. This sinner Jacob was being promised that from him one day would come the Messiah.

And in thy seed shall all, all of them, all families of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with thee and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest and will bring thee again into this land. For I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.

And Jacob awaked out of his sleep and said, Surely the Lord is in this place. And I knew it not. And he was afraid and said, How awesome is this place.

This is none other but the house of God and this place that I thought was so God forsaken has become for me the gate of heaven. Now that is a picture of how today men may have a head-on personal encounter with Jesus Christ. I know it's usual to take an Old Testament incident and apply it to ourselves in New Testament terms.

And it's perfectly valid to do that even if the New Testament doesn't happen to make any reference to that Old Testament incident. But in this case, none other than Jesus Christ makes reference to this very incident and therefore we are right to apply it to ourselves as picturing the sort of encounters we may have with Jesus Christ. Do you remember when Jesus referred to this dream of Jacob? Do you remember how he applied it to himself? It's one of the most moving verses, I think almost, in the New Testament.

At the end of John chapter 1 we see Philip calling Nathanael saying, we found him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth. I'm reading from verse 46. And Nathanael said unto him, can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Because he knew his Bible.

And the Old Testament prophesied that Messiah would come out of Bethlehem. What are you talking to me then about a Jesus who comes from Nazareth? And Philip, very wise, he didn't argue the point with him and simply said, just come and see. Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him and saith unto him, Behold an Israelite, in whom is no guile.

Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God, thou art the King of Israel. That was a quick conversion for you if there was one, wasn't there? Every doubt gone, just because of those special words that Jesus said to him.

Jesus answered and said unto thee, because I said, I saw thee under the fig tree, Believest thou? Thou shalt see greater things than these. And Jesus saith unto him, Listen, verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. In other words, Jesus claimed to be the spiritual counterpart of that ladder which Jacob saw in his dream.

He was the spiritual counterpart of that ladder up to heaven. Some time ago, my wife and I were in Switzerland, having meetings, and we were leaving the home where we were staying that day, and the daughter of the house had to get up before we would get up and get off to work early, and she wasn't going to see us to say goodbye. So she slipped a little note under the bedroom door, and it was a little note of giving us her good wishes, the assurance of her prayers, appreciation of the meetings, and that sort of thing.

And then she added this little word of encouragement for us. If your pillow be like a stone, there is a ladder going up from it, and angels ascending and descending on that ladder. And that ladder, going up from whatever stony pillow you may be lying on, is Jesus.

And we've got the very authority of Jesus himself, for looking upon that ladder up to heaven as a picture of him who is the one and only connection between earth and heaven, the sinner and God. So it was this dream, and the meaning of it, that made all the difference to Jacob. He saw heaven open.

I'm sure his guilty conscience would have told him that heaven would be shut against such a man as he, but it wasn't. He saw heaven open. And not only that, but he saw there were steps leading up to it, right up to that open heaven.

Then he saw something strange. He saw angels ascending up that ladder, up that staircase, taking, I presume, his needs, his sorrows, his problems, up to God. And he saw other angels descending on that ladder, bringing down God's grace and mercy to that needy man at the foot.

And above it he saw the Lord, speaking words of incredible good concerning him and his seed. And I believe we're to see, as I've said, that staircase, that ladder, as a glorious and a wonderfully complete portrayal of Jesus, whom you and I need to have a personal encounter with. But you need to have a conception of Jesus to have an adequate encounter with him.

You may be seeking the wrong Jesus, and you can seek him with all your heart, but if it's the wrong Jesus, nothing will come of it. Everything depends on your conception of the Jesus you're seeking. For many, Jesus is little more than another Moses, who tells you what's right and what's wrong, who blesses you when you do the right, but cannot but censure you when you do the wrong.

And in this message it's mostly the wrong that we do. All we get from such a Jesus is censure. But that's not the Jesus whom the Spirit reveals in the Bible.

The law came by Moses and condemned the whole lot of us. Grace and truth has come by Jesus, and that's the Jesus you and I need to have an encounter with. What a contrast.

The ladder that Jacob saw, with the ladders we've been trying to climb. You know, man has a constitutional love of ladders. If a man wants to get to know God, how's he going to do it? Oh, he knows how, by means of a ladder, by means of a formula, steps he's going to take, heights he's going to climb up to, walls he's going to keep, and he's quite sure that that's the way to get to know God by means of a ladder up which he's got to climb.

If a man who knows the Lord wants to improve his relationship with God, it will always be, unless corrected by the Spirit of God, by means of a ladder. Once again, steps he's got to take, a formula for his devotion, or for a regulation of his Christian life which he's got to adopt, new heights which he's got to attain, walls which he's got to keep. And I would say, until corrected by the Spirit of God, that's a natural thing for all of us.

We always gravitate towards ladders. If a man finds himself in a pit of depression, or of guilt, because of unsettled things in the past, or because of a habit he can't break, he's quite sure how the victory's going to come to him. It's going to be by means of a ladder, and he's going to get out of that pit by some ladder such as I've suggested.

And if we want more successful service, if an individual does, to be a better soul winner, and have improved devotions, if a church wants to have outreach, there's never a fault, but it's always by means of a ladder. The market is proliferating with how-to books, and every one of those how-to books is nothing more than a ladder. There's the how-to, there are the runs, there are the steps, climb that step and you'll get there, if you can climb it.

Well intruded, the ladders I'm speaking of, to which we so naturally gravitate, are all really variants of the way of works. We've always known, of course, those of us who know ourselves saved, that by grace are we saved through faith, and not of works. But we haven't always understood, by grace are we going to be further blessed, and not of works.

We're quite sure that whereas we must be saved by grace, the improvement of our spiritual life is somehow or other, in some subtle way we may not immediately spot, it's going to be by work, by means of a ladder, by means of a method, by means of a formula. Let me say several things about these ladders, of which we're so often driven to climb. The ladders which are sometimes preached to us at church, for

sometimes that's all really preached.

Wretched ladders, which have more than been the death of us. Or perhaps they haven't been to you yet. Do you know why they haven't? You haven't taken them seriously enough.

If you took those proposed ladders really seriously, they would be the death of you, because there'd be more than you could climb. Three things. Here you are, there are three points.

First, they don't start where we are. The good advice we're given, the things we're told we ought to do. You know, they don't take account of the fact that we are and have been what we have been, and that we've done what we have done.

They all assume that we are better than we really are, and well capable to tackle those ladders. And my friend, they don't begin where you really are. They don't assume that you have sunk to that pitch which you have sunk.

Profess Christian that we may be, and the way the preacher sometimes preaches to Christians, it doesn't assume the inner story of failure and sinfulness which is hidden behind. They don't start there. They just, they begin just outside your reach.

Not really available. And then the top of these ladders or staircases never reaches to heaven. If you do manage to do what you're told to do, your conscience always tells you that there was more you could have done.

There was better that you could have done. And even when you've tried to improve on that, conscience says not enough yet. Take for instance the matter of devotions.

I don't want to pick on devotions more than any other thing as a possible ladder, but it can become such. A person hears a talk on the necessity of daily devotions in the life of a Christian. He's never thought of doing that.

He said, well, I'd better start. And he sets aside 15 minutes a day to read his Bible and to pray. And then he hears somebody talk to somebody, he never spends less than half an hour.

Oh, I ought to spend half an hour. So he does, beautifully. He spends half an hour.

And then one day he meets one man who never spends less than a whole hour. What? A whole hour? So he adjusts his schedule and his time of rising or whenever it is, and he sets aside a whole hour. He finds it difficult to fill the hour, but still he told me you've got to spend an hour.

And then what do you think? He picks up a book about praying Hyde, the famous man of prayer, and you spend whole nights in prayer, and at that you give up. You just can't win. No, I don't want to regard our devotions as more particularly likely to be a ladder, though they can be.

They're nothing else, but do you see what I'm getting at? It never really gets you there. There's always something more you've got to do. No wonder you haven't got the blessing you need and are not really free from captivity.

There's more. And try as you will, the top doesn't reach to heaven. And as for that pit, if conceivably you might succeed in getting to the top of the pit, it's only to discover you had the ladder on the wrong wall, and

you've come out the wrong side, further away from God, rather than nearer, more a Pharisee than you ever were before, and God says the proud, he knows a part of.

No, these ladders which we think are going to do so much for us, the top never reaches to heaven, and then they all involve climbing. Well, of course. What's a ladder for? What's a staircase for, if it isn't to climb? And all these proposed ways of victory and blessing and revival involve what one may call striving, struggling, climbing.

But the trouble is, if the truth were known, you're too weak to climb. I know I am. The moment you propose me a ladder to climb, I tell you I'm defeated before I begin.

I'm not likely to have strength to take the fourth step, let alone all the long succession of steps afterward. And the attempt to climb those ladders is going to bring me to a place of despair more than I ever knew before. You see Paul climbing the ladder of holiness, or trying to, in Romans 7, but the good that he would he didn't do, and the evil that he said he wasn't going to do, that he did, and he ended up saying, O wretched Christian, that I am in despair.

And I want to tell you, this is always the ultimate effect of these ladders. They become the death of you. And if they haven't become the death of you because you haven't tried, you'll really try, and you'll end up in despair as Paul did.

How different the ladder that Jacob saw, the ladder that he saw, the staircase he saw, was set up on the earth. It began just where he lay. And Jesus and his cross, this wonderful ladder, begins where I am, taking account of me being what I have been.

And having done what I have done. And Jesus tells me that that which I've done, which I hardly dare disclose to another, has been settled by him on that cross to the entire satisfaction of God, even before it was committed, to the satisfaction of God shown by the fact that he raised his son from the dead. For if Jesus had not paid the debt, he ne'er had been at freedom's end.

And Jesus, and that cross of Calvary, is available to us on street level, just where you can reach it. Jesus is not shocked at what you have to tell him. Oh yes, you have to tell him.

But he's not going to be shocked. He took the shock of it way back on Calvary's cross. And the ladder, the staircase, begins just where you are, the failed saint.

And the top reaches to heaven. Sure it does. Not only heaven after you die, but into that high and holy place, the holiest holies of God's presence now, this ladder, this Jesus, this cross of his, the top of it reaches right there and brings me there.

Jesus entered into the holy place not made with hands. Do you know how he entered in? By virtue of what he entered in? Or you say he entered in because he was the son of God. No, that wasn't the ground on which the son of God went back to glory.

For I remind you that he was made sin for us, although personally he knew no sin. And heaven regarded him as the effigy of sin. And he had to go, my God, why have you forsaken me? How can such a man go back then into glory? I'll tell you how he went.

Hebrews 9 tells us he entered in with his own blood into the holy place, having accomplished eternal redemption for us. Jesus didn't get back by being the son of God. He got in there in the way that you get in there, by his own blood.

It was enough for all the sins for which he took responsibility. And when he presented himself with his own blood, the everlasting doors lifted up their heads and bade him welcome. And if the blood of Jesus was enough for Jesus, it's enough for me.

For he had on him more sins than I've ever had. He had on him the world. And yet the blood was enough.

It was by that blood, Hebrews 13 tells us, that he was raised from the dead. But for the fact there's power in the blood, he was still being the tomb. He was raised from the dead, it says in Hebrews 13, by the blood of the everlasting covenant.

And by that blood he went again into the holy place and he left the door open to you and me. And I get in by that same blood, by that same ladder. And as I take a sinner's place at street level, at the foot of that cross, I am that moment, if I will but believe it, in him at heaven's level.

What a ladder. What a ladder. You know that hymn, Beneath the Cross of Jesus? In the books over here there are only three verses.

We have five in England. And all what wonderful verses they are. And there's one verse which says, O safe and blessed children, O refuge tried and sweet, O Christ in place, Where heaven's love and heaven's doctors meet, As to the ancient patriarch, The wondrous dream was given, So seems my Saviour's cross to me, A ladder up to heaven.

And if I can get to the foot of that ladder at street level, admitting what I am, in him, I'm at heaven's level. The top of it reaches to heaven and I'm through. I've got that at last.

But by how different a way than what I was trying. And that's one other thing. Jacob found there was no climbing for him to do on the ladder which he set.

He was so grateful. Not only that heaven was open, but there was a staircase up. And just as he was about to brace himself for the long haul up that staircase, he discovered there was no need.

There were angels going up. Women, obviously it would seem, meant to symbolize his need, his sorrows, his loneliness, his blaming of himself to the one at the top. And there were other angels descending with the love and the mercy of God for the sinner that lay at the bottom.

Perhaps an angel going up had a conversation with one coming down. And the one going up said, Don't you know that fellow down there? He's in a terrible state. I've never met a man more miserable.

He's so homesick he's blaming himself. Don't you blame man? He's weeping at the bottom of that, this ladder. I've never met a man in such a state.

It's all right said the one coming down. I'm bringing to him the very mercy from heaven that he needs so now. And just as you are bracing yourself for the steep ascent to heaven, you're really going to do it this time.

You're going to make that formula work, as you thought. You see Jesus, this ladder. And you found it's all been done in him.

In him are we. And sins and sorrows have already been brought up through God's grace. And in him, that supply of mercy, grace, forgiveness and power has already been brought down to us.

I don't think this story is meant to teach us much about angels. Of course the Bible teaches us about angels. But I don't think that this story isn't given to teach us about angels.

It's given us to teach about Jesus. And it means every bit of the story to give an adequate presentation of the Jesus in whom all fullness blows for the failed saint and the mealy sinner which fullness is available to him on street levels. There's no need, dear one, for anything extra to him.

It's all in him. And that as available to the failure as grace can make it. This is all my hope and fear.

Nothing but the blood of Jesus. This is all my righteousness. Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

You see, you see what my needs are in him. But what about those wrong things? They've been anticipated too. That's why it must be Jesus and an understanding of his blood.

Because your greatest needs are moral needs. And that has been answered. Even those are taken care of in this Jesus, this ladder so available.

This is the one with whom you need an encounter. You must have an encounter with the right Jesus. Not the Jesus which is little more than another Moses.

But him who is full of grace and truth for the man who just can't help himself. To whom all things dwell. That's the one.

And I tell you, even your seeking will be simply a result of a new vision. This is what the Holy Spirit come to do, to reveal Jesus. Now he says, seek him.

My dear friend, you don't need to wait till he says seek him. You're there. You say, I seek, I seek, I qualify.

The last word about the man in the New Testament who has promised a realization in his experience of that which Jacob saw, Nathanael. As Jesus saw Nathanael coming, he said, Behold, in Israel I can be in whom is no guile. He didn't say in Israel I can be in whom is no sin.

There was plenty of sin in Nathanael as in every man. What he meant in Israel was indeed in whom is no hiding of sin. And when Nathanael said, How do you know me? He said, Before Philip told you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.

He said, Lord, you're the son of God. You're the Christ. Just because Jesus had those wills.

Nothing's something rather special about that fig tree, don't you think? And I imagine it was special to Nathanael. It was there that he used to like to go when he wanted to think. And I believe he was a thinker.

When he wanted to puzzle things out, it was through that fig tree he went and he sat under it. And it would seem that not a day before or so, Nathanael had been sitting under his fig tree, and this time was a little different. You know, he's trying to pray.

He didn't really know the Lord to whom he was praying, but he was trying to. And you knew his prayer consisted of being honest with that God. I imagine he was taking up the mark.

He was telling God what he wasn't. He wasn't asking so much as telling God, you know, I'm a failure. I'm supposed to know you, I go to the synagogue, but I don't really know you.

If you're a failure in me, and I'm a failure as a husband, as a father. And he was going into the witness box against himself, so to speak. And Jesus knew it.

That was why he was able to say, an Israelite indeed in whom is no guile, because he knew under that fig tree. Something like that had been taken care of. That was the man who was promised that he would see the angels of God ascending and descending from him to heaven, on, on, the Son of Man.

And those are the people who see this vision of the cross, and in seeing it have an encounter with Jesus. Those who confess what they are. Who admit their phoniness.

Who take time out telling God what they're not. Who start with one thing and then go on to another, until everything as far as they know themselves has been uncovered. They're the people who get the vision, who do go into the witness box against themselves.

And I would suggest a greater portion of your time in prayer should be spent in doing that. You wouldn't lack a new vision of grace, a new vision of the cross, a new vision of Jesus, when we do that. Those of us who tell God, I've tried and it doesn't work, go on to it, and what else have you tried? And the Lord says, and what else are you going to tell me? And what else? There are times when I've been beaten in this work to which he's called me.

When I have responsibilities in this work which are beyond me, and have no time to get ready for them. And he said, if you haven't got much time, spend all the little time you have just telling me what you are and what you haven't got. I remember doing that on one occasion.

I couldn't get to the place in time where I had to preach, to go to the home of a friend with whom I was staying, and after tea to go up to my bedroom and have a lovely time of prayer, and come down to the group, the meeting, spiritually presentable. Suddenly went round with that car and all I could do was to get outside the church to a little cafe and have ten minutes with a cup of tea and my Bible. I said, what in the world am I going to do? Because I had hoped on that journey to be turning things over, instead of which I was wondering what in the world was going on under that hood.

And the Lord said, you haven't got much time, have you? Spend all of it. Not frantically scraping for a message. Spend all of it telling me about yourself.

How completely lacking in peace you've been, how worried, how distracted, how resentful of this and of that, that you haven't got the love for those you're going to preach to, that you haven't got the peace in your heart. So I started and said, what else? They said, no, nobody did. Forget the meeting, tell me.

And don't even ask. Just tell me where you are. And I got under the fig tree that day.

And just as I was having to leave the cafe to go across to the church, I said, well you know what, there does happen to be a meeting tonight. And I turned to the fly leaf of my Bible and there were some scrappy old notes of a sermon I'd given years before, which had long since died on me. And as I turned the fly leaf

of my Bible, in a matter of seconds, God says, that's it.

And that night, this was years ago, down the aisle they said, the sons are on the mission field today. And people praised God for a mighty victory. They knew how narrowly it missed being an ignominious defeat.

If I'd struggled up some ladder, it would have been. But oh, this place, this fig tree, this place where I can really meet Jesus, where I'm honest about myself, there I see the ladder, the staircase I see Jesus and in Him I've got all I need. Maybe you need to get under that fig tree.

Maybe you haven't been honest. Maybe you've been blaming somebody else. Every time you point a finger to another person, even in your mind, and say it's your fault, whereas one finger points at them, three fingers are pointing back at you.

This is the way to have a head-on encounter with the Jesus of Calvary, the God of grace. And when you see Him like that, there'll be only incentive in the world to run to meet such a one. Knowing, finding Him you're going to find all the other problems settled in an incidental way because you've found Him, the one in whom all fullness dwells to you.

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